

The Promise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 22, Heb. 11:17, Lev. 18:21, John 1:1–3, Rom. 5:6–8, Genesis 23–25, Rom. 4:1–12.*

Memory Text: “Now Abraham was old, well advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things” (*Genesis 24:1, NKJV*).

Finally, as God had promised, Sarah bore Abraham a son, “in his old age” (*Gen. 21:2*), and he named the baby Isaac (*see Gen. 21:1–5*). But the story of Abraham is far from over, reaching a climactic moment when he took his son to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed. Isaac, however, is replaced by a ram (*Gen. 22:13*), which signified God’s commitment to bless the nations through his “seed” (*Gen. 22:17, 18*). That Seed, of course, was Jesus (*Acts 13:23*). Hence, in this astonishing (and in some ways troubling) story, more of the plan of salvation is revealed.

Whatever the deep spiritual lessons here, the family of Abraham, nevertheless, must have been shaken by it, and the future of Abraham is not clear. Sarah dies after the sacrifice at Moriah (*Genesis 23*), and Isaac remains single.

Abraham then takes the initiative to make sure that the “right” future will follow him. He arranges the marriage of his son to Rebekah (*Genesis 24*), who will give birth to two sons (*Gen. 25:21–23*), and Abraham himself marries Keturah, who will give him many children (*Gen. 25:1–6*). This week, we will follow Abraham to the end of his life (*Gen. 25:7–11*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 21.

Mount Moriah

Read Genesis 22:1–12 and Hebrews 11:17. What was the meaning of this test? What spiritual lessons come from this amazing event?

Genesis 22 has become a classic in world literature and has inspired philosophers and artists, not just theologians. The meaning of God’s test is difficult to comprehend, however. This divine command contradicted the later biblical prohibition against human sacrifices (*Lev. 18:21*), and it surely seemed to work against God’s promise of an eternal covenant through Isaac (*Gen. 15:5*).

What, then, was the purpose of God’s calling him to do this? Why test him in such a powerful way?

The biblical notion of “test” (in Hebrew, *nissah*) embraces two opposite ideas. It refers to the idea of judgment; that is, a judgment in order to know what is in the heart of the tested one (*Deut. 8:2; compare with Gen. 22:12*). But it also brings the assurance of God’s grace on behalf of the tested (*Exod. 20:18–20*).

In this case, Abraham’s faith in God takes him to the point that he runs the risk of losing his “future” (his posterity). And yet, because he trusts God, he will do what God asks, no matter how difficult it all is to understand. After all, what is faith if not trust in what we don’t see or fully understand?

Also, biblical faith is not so much about our capacity to give to God and to sacrifice for Him—though that has a role, no doubt (*Rom. 12:1*)—but about our capacity to trust Him and to receive His grace while understanding just how undeserving we are.

This truth was reaffirmed in what followed. All the works of Abraham, his many zealous activities, his painful journey with his son, even his readiness to obey and offer to God the best of himself, however instructive, could not save him. Why? Because the Lord Himself had provided a ram for the intended sacrifice, which itself pointed to his only hope of salvation, Jesus.

Abraham must have, then, understood grace. It is not our works for God that save us, but it is instead God’s work for us (*Eph. 3:8; compare with Rom. 11:33*), however much, like Abraham, we are called to work for God, which Abraham’s actions powerfully reveal (*James 2:2–23*).

What does the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah say to you personally about your faith and how you manifest it?

God Will Provide

Read Genesis 22:8, 14, 18. How did God fulfill His promise that He would provide? What was provided?

When Isaac asked about the sacrificial animal, Abraham gave an intriguing answer: God will “ ‘provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering’ ” (*Gen. 22:8, NKJV*). Yet, the Hebrew verbal form can actually mean “God will provide Himself as the lamb.” The verb “provide” (*yir’eh lo*) is used in a way that can mean “provide Himself” (or literally, “see Himself”).

What we are being shown here, then, is the essence of the plan of salvation, with the Lord Himself suffering and paying in Himself the penalty for our sins!

Read John 1:1–3 and Romans 5:6–8. How do these verses help us understand what happened at the Cross, which is prefigured in the sacrifice here on Mount Moriah?

There, at Mount Moriah, long before the Cross, the sacrificial ram “caught in a thicket by his horns” (*Gen. 22:13*) was pointing right to Jesus. He is One that is “seen” here, as Abraham explains later, “In the mount where the LORD is seen” (*Gen. 22:14, author’s translation*). Jesus Himself had pointed to Abraham’s prophetic utterance here, when He said, echoing Abraham’s statement: “ ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad’ ” (*John 8:56, NKJV*).

“It was to impress Abraham’s mind with the reality of the gospel, as well as to test his faith, that God commanded him to slay his son. The agony which he endured during the dark days of that fearful trial was permitted that he might understand from his own experience something of the greatness of the sacrifice made by the infinite God for man’s redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 154.

How does what happened here help us better understand what happened at the Cross and what God has suffered in our behalf? What should our response be to what has been done for us?

The Death of Sarah

In Genesis 22:23, we see the report of the birth of Rebekah, which anticipates the future marriage between Isaac and Rebekah (*Genesis 24*). Likewise, the report of the death and burial of Abraham's wife, Sarah (*Genesis 23*), anticipates his future marriage with Keturah (*Gen. 25:1–4*).

Read Genesis 23. What function does the story of Sarah's death and burial play in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham?

The mention of the death of Sarah after the story of the sacrifice of Isaac suggests that she might have been affected by this incident, which almost cost her son's life. In some way, Sarah also was involved in the "test" with her husband, just as she was in his travels and his occasional lapses in faith (*Gen. 12:11–13*).

Though we don't know how much Sarah knew about the incident after it occurred, we can infer that she probably learned of it eventually. Sarah was not the kind of woman who would keep quiet on matters that were of significance or were disturbing her (*compare with Gen. 16:3–5; Gen. 18:15; Gen. 21:9, 10*). Her absence and her silence, and even the timing of her death following that dramatic event, say more about her relevance to the events than did her physical presence. The fact that Sarah's old age is mentioned (*Gen. 23:1*), in echo to Abraham's old age (*Gen. 24:1*), shows her importance to the story.

In fact, Sarah is the only woman in the Old Testament of whom the number of her years is mentioned, which could show her involvement in the story even after the fact. The focus on the purchase of Sarah's burial place (which covers most of the chapter), rather than on her death, emphasizes the connection with the Promised Land.

Already, the specification that she died "in the land of Canaan" (*Gen. 23:2*) underlines the rooting of Sarah's death in God's promise of the land. Sarah is the first of Abraham's clan to have died and been buried in the Promised Land. Abraham's concern about himself, "a foreigner and a visitor" (*Gen. 23:4, NKJV*), and his insistent argument with the sons of Heth, show that Abraham is interested not just in acquiring a burial place; he is primarily concerned with settling in the land permanently.

Read Genesis 23:6. What does this tell us about the kind of reputation Abraham had? Why is this important in understanding what he was used by the Lord to do?

A Wife for Isaac

Genesis 24 tells the story of the marriage of Isaac after Sarah's death. The two stories are related.

Read Genesis 24. Why is Abraham so concerned that his son not marry a woman from the Canaanites?

Just as Abraham wanted to acquire the land in order to bury his wife, because of God's promise to his descendants that they would have this land, he now insists that Isaac not settle outside of the Promised Land either (*Gen. 24:7*). Also, Isaac's move to bring his bride to Sarah's tent and the note that Rebekah comforted Isaac "after his mother's death" (*Gen. 24:67*) point back to Sarah's death, implying Isaac's pain at the loss of his mother.

The story is full of prayers and fulfillment of prayers and rich with lessons about God's providence and human freedom. It begins with Abraham's words. Swearing by " 'the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth' " (*Gen. 24:3, NKJV*), Abraham is first of all acknowledging God as the Creator (*Gen. 1:1, Gen. 14:19*), with a direct bearing on the births of Abraham's descendants, including the Messiah Himself.

The reference to " 'His angel' " and to " 'the LORD God of heaven' " (*Gen. 24:7, NKJV*) points back to the Angel of the Lord, who came from heaven to rescue Isaac from being slaughtered (*Gen. 22:11*). The God who controls the universe, the Angel of the Lord who intervened to save Isaac, will lead in this question of marriage.

Abraham leaves open, however, the possibility that the woman will not respond to God's call. As powerful as He is, God does not force humans to obey Him. Although God's plan for Rebekah is to follow Eliezer, she retains her freedom of choice. That is, it was possible that this woman would not want to come, and if not, she would not be forced to.

Hence, we see here another example of the great mystery of how God has given us, as humans, free will, free choice, a freedom that He will not trample on. (If He did trample, it would not be free will.) And yet, somehow, despite the reality of human free will, and many of the terrible choices humans make with that free will, we can still trust that in the end God's love and goodness, ultimately, will prevail.

Why is it so comforting to know that while not all things are God's will, He is still in charge? How do prophecies like Daniel 2, for instance, prove this point to us?

A Wife for Abraham

Read Genesis 24:67–25:8. What is the meaning of these final events in the life of Abraham?

After Sarah died, Abraham married again. Like Isaac, he is comforted after the death of Sarah (*Gen. 24:67*). The memory of Sarah must still surely be vivid in the mind of the patriarch, as it is for his son.

Yet, the identity of his new wife is unclear. The fact that the chronicler associates Keturah's sons together with Hagar's sons, without mentioning the name of Keturah, suggests, however, that Keturah could (as some have suggested) be Hagar. We just don't know. It also is significant that Abraham behaves with Keturah's sons the same way he did with Hagar's son: he sends them away to avoid any spiritual influence and make a clear distinction between his son with Sarah and the other sons.

He also gives "all that he had unto Isaac" (*Gen. 25:5*) while he "gave gifts to the sons of the concubines" (*Gen. 25:6, NKJV*). The classification of "concubines" may also imply that Keturah's status, like Hagar, was that of a concubine. The potential identification of Keturah as Hagar may also explain the subtle allusion to the memory of Sarah as a prelude to his marriage with Keturah-Hagar.

What's interesting is that in Genesis 25:1–4, 12–18, a list of the children that Abraham had with Keturah, as well as a list of Ishmael's children, is given. The purpose of the genealogy after Abraham's marriage with Keturah, who gave him six sons, versus his two other sons (Isaac and Ishmael), is perhaps to provide immediate evidence of God's promise that Abraham would father many nations.

The second genealogy concerned the descendants of Ishmael, who also composed 12 tribes (*compare with Gen. 17:20*), just as Jacob's would (*Gen. 35:22–26*). Of course, God's covenant will be reserved to the seed of Isaac (*Gen. 17:21*), not Ishmael, a point that Scripture is very clear about.

The report of Abraham's death sandwiched between the two genealogies (*Gen. 25:7–11*) also testifies to God's blessing. It reveals the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, made many years earlier, that he would die "at a good old age" (*Gen. 15:15, NKJV*) and "full of years" (*compare with Eccles. 6:3*).

In the end, the Lord remained true to His promises of grace to His faithful servant Abraham, whose faith is depicted in Scripture as a great example, if not *the best* example, in the Old Testament of salvation by faith (*see Rom. 4:1–12*).

Further Thought: Because Abraham was the extraordinary prophet with whom God would share His plans (*Gen. 18:17*), God entered Abraham’s human sphere and shared with him, to some degree, His plan of salvation through the sacrifice of His Son.

“Isaac was a figure of the Son of God, who was offered a sacrifice for the sins of the world. God would impress upon Abraham the gospel of salvation to man. In order to do this, and make the truth a reality to him as well as to test his faith, He required him to slay his darling Isaac. All the sorrow and agony that Abraham endured through that dark and fearful trial were for the purpose of deeply impressing upon his understanding the plan of redemption for fallen man. He was made to understand in his own experience how unutterable was the self-denial of the infinite God in giving His own Son to die to rescue man from utter ruin. To Abraham no mental torture could be equal to that which he endured in obeying the divine command to sacrifice his son.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 369.

“Abraham had become an old man, and expected soon to die; yet one act remained for him to do in securing the fulfillment of the promise to his posterity. Isaac was the one divinely appointed to succeed him as the keeper of the law of God and the father of the chosen people, but he was yet unmarried. The inhabitants of Canaan were given to idolatry, and God had forbidden intermarriage between His people and them, knowing that such marriages would lead to apostasy. The patriarch feared the effect of the corrupting influences surrounding his son. . . . In the mind of Abraham the choice of a wife for his son was a matter of grave importance; he was anxious to have him marry one who would not lead him from God. . . . Isaac, trusting to his father’s wisdom and affection, was satisfied to commit the matter to him, believing also that God Himself would direct in the choice made.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 171.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, talk about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Try to imagine the kind of faith that this account reveals. What is so astonishing, and yet at the same time troubling, about this story?
- ② What about free will? Why does our faith make no sense without it being a reality? What examples do we have in the Bible of free will and how, despite the wrong choices people make, God’s will ultimately is accomplished?

Two Divine Appointments

By THEDA PIENAAR

I have a habit of not traveling without first asking God whether the trip would be His will. I live in Ireland, while my family lives in South Africa and a sister lives in Namibia. I visit them about once a year. On the airplane, I read the Bible, Ellen White books, and the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*. I also always take *Steps to Christ* in my bag. The books shorten the trip and lead to interesting contacts. Every time I travel, something interesting happens.

One time, I started talking with the man seated next to me while waiting for our flight at the airport in Dublin, Ireland. It turned out that he worked as a special detective for the Irish police force and traveled home to see his family in Cape Town, South Africa, every two to three months. We chatted about life while waiting for our turn to board the plane. On the plane, a young woman sat beside me and immediately began speaking. "I arrived late at the airport and just made the plane," she said. "I am so stressed!"

"God knew that you needed to catch this plane," I said.

I spoke about how God takes charge of our lives when we allow Him.

Just before takeoff, the flight attendant told the young woman that she had taken the wrong seat. She left, and who should sit beside me but the policeman. "Isn't this interesting!" I said. "I believe God does things for a reason."

"You believe in God?" the man asked.

He asked about my religious background, and I said I am a Seventh-day Adventist. "Isn't that strange," he said. "My wife has been trying to convert me for many years. She is Seventh-day Adventist."

"I am thrilled to meet you," I said. And I was.

We spoke about salvation, and I gave him a copy of *Steps to Christ*. "My wife has been trying to get me to read this," he said. "Now I will read it."

My two encounters were so remarkable. The ice was broken with the police detective before we boarded the plane. I also was able to mention God to the woman who sat in the wrong seat. Ireland is a very secular country, and it is not easy to speak to people about Christianity. But God provided two opportunities before the plane even left the ground.



This mission story illustrates the following components of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's "I Will Go" strategic plan: Mission Objective No. 2, "To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities [and] among unreached and under-reached people groups"; Spiritual Growth Objective No. 5, "To disciple individuals and families into spirit-filled lives"; and the Holy Spirit Objective, "To be defined as the Holy Spirit leads." Read more: IWillGo2020.org.